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SUBJECT: SISTANI CALLS FOR END TO SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AND FORMATION OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN MEETING WITH SCIRI LEADER AL-HAKIM

CLASSIFIED BY: GARY ANDERSON, ACTING REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO, AL-HILLAH, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (U) This is a SET Najaf cable.

¶12. (C) SUMMARY: In a March 20 meeting with SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) leader Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani called for an end to sectarian violence. A participant related the substance of the conversation immediately afterwards to SET Najaf local staff. Sistani indicated support for relief efforts for displaced Shi'a families arriving in Najaf from mixed Shi'a-Sunni or predominantly Sunni regions due to violence there. Sistani made the point that the formation of a national government would help ease sectarian strife. The meeting occurred at Sistani's residence in Najaf's Old City. Al-Hakim was in Najaf to meet with SCIRI officials. END SUMMARY.

¶13. (C) Sistani welcomed Al-Hakim into his home for a meeting on a wide range of subjects. The conversation concentrated on the political situation in Iraq. In particular, Sistani spoke about his desire to heal the Shi'a-Sunni rift. Most important to Sistani in tamping down the sectarian strife is the formation of a national government. He noted that this vital step would "pour water on the burning ethnic conflict." Sistani also suggested a conference of scholars. He asserted that this meeting of both Sunni and Shia academics would be able to talk openly about the ethnic problems in Iraq and supply solutions.

¶14. (C) Sistani told Al-Hakim that it is important to find support and resources for the people who have traveled from the northern parts of Iraq to the southern provinces (due to sectarian fighting or intimidation). They should receive all the assistance possible from local governments and aid organizations, Sistani urged. He noted, however, that this effort should include a plan to return these families to the homes. The way to do that, Sistani said, is to ensure their safety and security in the northern provinces.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: After the bombing of the Al-Askariyah shrine in Samarra, Sistani called publicly for calm. In this private meeting with SCIRI leader Al-Hakim, he continued that appeal. At this point in time, it seems Sistani is restricting his efforts to affect the national political climate to privately entreating Shi'a politicians. In the absence of a major event, he appears unlikely to issue any statements regarding national issues. END COMMENT.

ANDERSON